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**February 8, 2006**

**The Impact of Liberia's Election on West Africa**

Mr. Chairman and ranking Minority Member, thank you for holding this hearing and highlighting Liberia's remarkable achievement, an affirmation of democracy in West Africa. Liberia's technically flawless elections teach several lessons and have major ramifications for the sub-region and globally. In this testimony, I will elaborate on the lessons learned, describe the process, discuss the regional, continental and global significance, outline challenges facing the new president and suggest ways in which the US can aid her.

**Lessons Learned**

First, Liberia teaches us that with sufficient financial inputs and human technical expertise, a war-torn country can have free, fair and transparent elections. Preparing Liberia for elections was a Herculean feat. With a large IDP population, few passable roads, 100,000 disgruntled excombatants, no electricity or potable water, and no recent experience with free and fair elections, Liberians went to the polls, and in orderly fashion elected a president, Senate and House of Representatives. This extraordinary achievement was possible largely due to the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), donor support and the determination of the Liberian people. The US contributed \$10 million to support the elections, assistance dollars well spent.

Second, Liberia demonstrated that a largely illiterate population can make informed voting decisions. Liberian voters split their tickets, electing candidates for the Senate and the House of Representatives from eight different parties. Listening to voters as they spoke of their reasons for supporting certain candidates, it was clear that they calculated their individual self-interest and the probability of peace in making their choices. This was possible because of the robust civic education campaign organized by UNMIL and the donors, involving a broad swath of Liberian civil society and implemented by US democracy- strengthening NGOs who, in turn, involved international observers and domestic election monitors.

A third lesson learned is that women have achieved a level of organizational skills and technical competencies that allow them to compete equally with men. There is universal acknowledgement that women are an underutilized resource in sustainable development efforts, and that African sustainable development is advanced by integrating women into the political and economic mainstream. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's election in part is testament to the organizational skills and political prowess of women. Unity Party (UP) women traveled throughout the country, urging women to support their candidate. Market women organized for her. Women's organizations organized rallies and support

for her. Continental women's organizations urged their members in Liberia to vote for her. In all cases, President Sirleaf was supported not because she was a woman, but because she was a *qualified* woman with a comprehensive, plausible plan to move the country forward.

### **The Electoral Process**

Liberians participated in a textbook electoral process that re-established electoral democracy in their country. Donors and Liberians collaborated to establish electoral institutions, develop a process and educate voters. Guided by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, Liberians, with the support of UNMIL, developed an electoral process that made wholesale fraud virtually impossible.

Key actors in the process included the National Election Commission (NEC), the Supreme Court, UNMIL, the donors, political parties and Liberian civil society, including strong women's groups and anti-corruption NGOs who assumed a watchdog function. Over 8,000 domestic observers, extensively trained by working with international NGOs such as the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES), the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI), competently and diligently watched the polls.

The 15,000 troops of UNMIL not only formed a dense security network, but also helped shape the electoral process, ensured that ballots were delivered to rural areas and transported completed ballots to state-of-the-art tabulation centers for the count.

Key Liberian institutions also were essential to the electoral success. The National Electoral Commission, ably chaired by Frances Morris-Johnson, assumed overall responsibility for organizing the elections, ensured civic education for voters and training for poll watchers, and oversaw the complaint process. Although the Supreme Court was the ultimate arbiter of legal challenges, citizens' faith in the competence and impartiality of the NEC was critical in keeping the process on track.

The NEC oversaw an electoral process that was textbook perfect, totally transparent with no hint of intimidation. Checks and balances abounded. Each polling station had five officers: voter registration officers searched through registration lists for ID numbers and pictures to find individual registrations as party officials hovered behind them; ballot issuers stamped each numbered ballot; voters placed their ballots in transparent ballot boxes with double seals whose numbers were read out to all assembled at the opening and closing of the polls by the presiding officer. A ballot box officer ensured that ballots were placed in the right boxes. As each voter exited, his or her index finger was dabbed with indelible ink to ensure that he or she couldn't vote again.

The whole process was open to domestic and international observers as well as party representatives. As added insurance, transparent ballot boxes guaranteed that the ballot boxes were visible to all throughout the entire process. While there is inevitably the possibility of retail voter mischief, the carefully crafted process made wholesale fraud virtually impossible.

Not only did the NEC organize textbook elections, it also managed to develop a system that was voter friendly and solicitous of the parties' interests. For instance, when the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) complained that unsavory characters might have bought or tampered with voter registration cards, for the runoff the NEC allowed party observers from the CDC and the Unity Party to stand behind the voter registration officer to ensure that the face and number on the card matched the designation on the registration roll.

Kudos to the voters in both sets of elections. On October 11, voters began to line up as early as 3:00 am in some areas. At Paynesville Community Academy in the volatile Red Light section of Monrovia, uncertainty about polling sites and registration glitches resulted in voters standing for hours in the wrong line, but voters were largely patient, appreciating the historical significance of a free, fair, transparent multi-party election- the first in Liberia's 159 year history.

The elections underscored the vulnerability of illiterate voters. In the October 11 election, if a voter was illiterate, the presiding officer read aloud the candidates' names and the voter stopped him or her when the officer got to the voter's preference. Illiterate voters are vulnerable in that there is no way of verifying that the presiding officer was casting the vote as the illiterate voter had directed. Nevertheless, an 80 percent illiterate population split their votes largely among six presidential candidates in the first round.

The voters made informed choices, splitting their tickets and electing representatives of eight parties to the Senate and to the House of Representatives. Voters made similarly informed choices in the run-off. Supporters of both candidates had rational reasons for supporting their candidates. Twenty-year-old Alex, a Weah partisan, explained his support through a CDC chant, "He know book, he no know book, I vote for him," by noting that the educated ("know book") officials who had governed the country in years past had not helped poor people. He felt that Weah, with no political baggage, could do a better job of governing the country.

On the other side, a market woman in New Krutown, a Weah stronghold, volunteered that she had voted for Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. She noted that Weah had promised football schools for the young men. "But what about my daughter?" the woman asked. "Who will educate her? Who will take care of me when I'm old?" She knew that Ellen Johnson Sirleaf had presented a plan for investing in education, re-building infrastructure, and seeking support from the international community. Other Sirleaf supporters argued that men had brought the country to its present devastation, so why not give a qualified woman the opportunity to govern the country. One elderly man opined, "It's time to 'give chance' to the Old Ma."

### **Regional, Continental and Global Significance**

Mr. Chairman, the hearing title notes the significance of the elections in West Africa. With due respect, I would suggest that the elections have significance not only for the sub-region, but for the African continent and globally for women.

Significance for West Africa: The election and the inauguration reinforced the rule of law and Liberians saw the orderly transfer of power. The two events rekindled Liberians' belief in the institutions of government and began the process of reconciliation.

In terms of regional security, Liberia is no longer a source of regional instability, providing child soldiers for Cote d'Ivoire, serving as a drug haven and offering a breeding ground for Al Qaeda. The country can now become an anchor for stability in the three Mano River Union countries. With rich resources—timber, diamonds, rubber, iron ore—Liberia also can contribute to sub-regional economic growth.

Significance for the Continent: Liberia's successful elections have begun to change the image of Africa. The image flashed around the world of President Sirleaf, wearing the sash of office, walking home after the inauguration went a long way to counter the image of Africa as chaotic and hopeless.

Key donors reinforced their support of orderly change on the continent with their presence, highlighted by First Lady Laura Bush and Secretary of State Rice. The attendance of the First Lady and Secretary Rice was interpreted as a strong signal that US is going to support the rebuilding of Liberia.

The Liberian elections also strengthened regional institutions, particularly the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). From the regional and sub-regional bodies' management of the departure of Charles Taylor to the AU election observation team to the post-election challenge of George Weah to the inauguration, AU and ECOWAS supported the rule of law and re-enforced the significance of elections as the established method of choosing leaders. Again, the graphic is the inauguration, as key leaders of the AU and NEPAD such as Thabo Mbeki, Olusegun Obasanjo and Abdoulaye Wade, joined by eight other African heads of state, signaled their support of a female president, duly elected. By their very presence, they conferred additional legitimacy on the Liberian election as the eleven men welcomed the first female into their ranks of 53 African heads-of-state.

Liberian success is an antidote to less successful elections such as the most recent Ethiopian election. The strength of the Liberian process provides a model for upcoming elections on the continent. It would be useful to have Liberians offer technical assistance to DRC as it plans for its landmark election in mid-May.

Significance Globally: In a global context, the Liberian election demonstrated that with adequate financial inputs and human expertise, a war-ravaged country can have a free, fair and transparent election and that civic education is hugely important in citizens' understanding of both the import and the process. The Liberian case contributes to the growing body of election experience in post-conflict countries, e.g. Iraq and Afghanistan.

The significance for women of the first female president cannot be overestimated. Not only did Liberia elect a woman, but women competently held leadership positions in all

aspects of the process. Women held leadership positions in the NEC as Chairperson Frances Johnson-Morris's strong leadership readily demonstrates. Women sit as Supreme Court justices and a good percentage of women were election officials, sometimes serving as the presiding officer at a polling station.

By electing a woman, Liberia, the first independent republic in Africa, again made history. Women in elected positions, multilateral institutions, the UN system, political aspirants and civil society from across the continent came to the inauguration to support the new president and to offer concrete program suggestions for Liberia's reconstruction. Women feel empowered by this successful role model. The number of female candidates for elected office is increasing and their candidacies are gaining more attention, both from other candidates and the media. The coincidence of Angela Merkel's assumption of the German chancellorship, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's victory and the victory of Chilean President-Elect Michelle Bachelet may usher in a new era of electoral politics. The elections of the three women increase the number of female heads of state and heads of government from nine to twelve, a stunning 25 percent increase within a two month period, so it is appropriate for the world to take notice.

### **The Way Forward**

Now the task is to stay the course and help Liberia to rebuild. After generous help to Liberia during the transition, the international community must continue and increase its assistance, supporting this new Liberian president of integrity and competence.

President Sirleaf needs all the help she can get. Devastated Liberia lacks infrastructure, electricity and potable water. The country has an 85 percent unemployment rate, 100,000 former combatants without jobs and without skills, an 80 percent illiteracy rate, major security deficits, Charles Taylor monitoring events in Nigeria and an expectant population that wants to see the democracy dividend now. To be credible, the new president must demonstrate some tangible progress fairly soon; she has given herself a 150 day benchmark. She cannot succeed without robust resources from the international community. There are several reasons why the US should take the lead.

It is in the national interest of the US to provide re-building assistance. Liberia's stability is important to our national security. Liberia lives in a rough neighborhood, with fragility in Sierra Leone and Guinea and ongoing civil war in Cote d'Ivoire. As stated earlier, instability in Liberia would encourage Al Qaeda and open the sub-region as a breeding ground for terrorists. Moreover, the US imports about twenty percent of its oil from West Africa, a flow that could be potentially disrupted if the region were compromised.

Liberia also offers an opportunity to demonstrate a successful transition from a failed state to a post-conflict success. Liberia has ricocheted from full-fledged civil war, to peace-making, peace-keeping and peace-building. As the country moves to post-conflict reconstruction, the international community has the opportunity to support a transition that could become a post-conflict model. Most of the ingredients are present—free and fair election, a motivated population, new leadership with integrity and the confidence of donors. The missing ingredient is major resources.

With the attention of many US policy makers drawn to Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and the war on terror, significant aid to Liberia would also demonstrate that the continent matters, that the Administration views security and sustainable development in West Africa as an integral component of a comprehensive US-Africa foreign policy template. Alternatively, in the case of Liberia, the donor community takes its lead from the US, and if our assistance is meager, the community will respond by reducing overall commitments. The 2004 donors conference success was fueled by the \$200 million US contribution.

Development assistance to Liberia is not only a strategic investment, but a moral and humanitarian one as well. No African nation has closer ties to the US, as we jointly hold almost two centuries of shared history. Liberia was founded by former US slaves, its constitution and basic forms of governance are modeled after our institutions. The special relationship continues today. Americans are warmly welcomed in Liberia and, given our historic ties, Liberia's story resonates with the American people. For many Americans, Liberia represents the African continent. More than ten percent of Americans have ethnic ties to Africa and many gauge their support of US foreign policy on the treatment that Africa receives.

Aid to Liberia is highly likely to yield success. We can concretely justify our support to a technically competent leadership with a history of fighting corruption and advocating for good government. Importantly, unlike some other countries, our involvement is welcomed. Our support will enable the new government's success and result in a win-win-win for Liberia, the continent and U.S. Africa policy.

The new president faces daunting challenges. In addition to the catalogue of problems stated above, Liberia has no banking system, no international credit, a devastated education system and a culture of corruption so deeply embedded that the transitional government was facing impeachment for corruption.

To tackle these challenges, President Sirleaf has set forth a four-part reconstruction and recovery plan to be overseen by the Liberian Reconstruction and Development Committee (LDRC). The plan focuses on security, governance, the provision of basic services and economic stabilization. Each component is discussed below.

Security: Security is an urgent concern with 100,000 ex-combatants, imperfect demobilization, instability in Cote d'Ivoire, uncertainty in Guinea, and Charles Taylor lurking in Nigeria. The US-based Dyncorps is training the new 2,000 person Liberian army. Our support for that task must continue. UNMIL currently provides the bulk of security and should be re-authorized to remain at current strength for at least the next twelve months.

Governance and Rule of Law: Good governance and rule of law have long been priorities of the new president. Indeed, President Sirleaf was the chair of the Governance

Committee of the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL), though she was constantly frustrated and under-funded in the position. Her governance priorities are fighting corruption, reducing the size of government by consolidating ministries and reducing the size of the civil service, civil service reform, and rewriting the constitution.

President Sirleaf began the anti-corruption crusade in her inaugural address when she said that she was disclosing her assets and asked the Speaker of the House and other legislators to do likewise. She is requiring that all of her appointees also disclose their assets. Unfortunately, she has no authority to require legislators to so disclose. Although she is just beginning her third week in office, she has already drafted and signed a code of conduct and she is establishing an anti-corruption commission.

Tackling civil service reform will be a major undertaking. The civil service is bloated and a seedbed of corruption. In some ways corruption within the civil service is understandable because anyone who has not been paid in 18 months might be tempted to request “special consideration.” The US should consider topping off civil service salaries to reduce the incentive for corruption. Donor action in Afghanistan might be a model for responding to the Liberian situation.

Basic Services and Infrastructure Committee: Basic services in Liberia are essentially non-existent. Several community development programs aim to mobilize communities to develop their own priorities, make decisions and begin to re-build their communities with schools, health clinics and agricultural inputs. The Academy for Educational Development (AED), the NGO for which I work, is involved in a Community Peace-Building and Development Program, Diompilor, which means “unity” in Vai. Funded by USAID, the program empowers communities to establish and act upon their own priorities. Often their priorities involve building schools and clinics, as well as tackling infrastructure needs, including digging wells and re-grading roads.

These community-based programs could be mobilized in the effort to restore electricity to Monrovia and in road-building projects. President Sirleaf has designated restoration of electricity to Monrovia as a top priority. Monrovia’s electrification could offer an excellent opportunity for a public-private partnership (PPP) since a re-electrification plan has already been developed and there are US companies that can provide poles and wire. The US has experience in restoring electricity in Iraq, so Liberia could benefit from lessons learned in that experience.

Similarly, road building lends itself to public-private partnerships. Roads are important for agriculture (farm-to-market roads), employment, security and returning/resettling people in their homes. UNMIL has four brigades and heavy equipment to contribute to the road effort, but no supplies. The new government could initiate public works projects with young people, teaching them road-building skills and offering them employment for a year or 18 months in a program akin to the US Civilian Conservation Corps of the Great Depression. Road-building, too, is a good vehicle for developing public-private partnerships. The PPPs could involve citizens, especially young people, private sector

construction firms, UNMIL and the GOL. Apparently, no donor is supporting road-building, but the Chinese are exploring the possibility.

In addition to community mobilization, Liberia must make a major investment in primary and secondary education. A country cannot develop with an 80 percent illiteracy rate. Education is one of President Sirleaf's three priorities of schools, wells and youth development. The education system has not functioned since 1990, so the government must invest in building schools, teacher training, curriculum development and textbooks. AED was involved in such a program until 1990. We are currently trying to locate materials and teachers who were involved in the program to explore the possibility of re-starting the program, building upon tested, Liberia-relevant materials.

In addition to traditional education, the new government must address the needs of unemployed, undereducated youth fairly immediately. Responding to the need for rapid start-up, AED has developed a four-part program, Emergency Response to Liberian Youth, that involves community mapping; youth empowerment through literacy, numeracy, conflict resolution, business development skills and micro-enterprise; distance education through radio; and community-building and conflict resolution through photography.

Special programs are needed for ex-combatants to teach them trade skills and the soft skills of conflict resolution and civic participation. Vocational training is needed for at least half a million young men and women who have had no opportunity to learn employable skills. One possibility comes from Liberia's maritime business, the country's greatest source of revenues at present. Liberia is the flag of convenience for more than 4,600 ships, but there are no Liberian sailors, deck hands, engineers, etc. aboard any of these ships. The maritime training school could be restarted, offering valuable skills and getting young people off the streets. (In another example of rampant corruption, annually a percentage of maritime revenues are allocated for maritime training; virtually all of those funds have gone missing.)

The University of Liberia was also devastated by the war. The new president, Al Hassan Konteh, has targeted the law school, teachers college and environmental stewardship as priorities. Dr. Konteh is eager to expand relationships with US institutions, thereby not only gaining needed expertise, but also further strengthening the long-term American constituency for Liberia.

When we think of US support for education, we should consider a request to the schools and hospitals unit of the Defense Department to rebuild the American School. Historically, the American School was intellectually rigorous, and an international meeting place. The existence of such a school would be a big incentive to bring back Liberians and encourage American expatriates as well as Liberians to apply for some of the key advisor jobs. The presence of such a school would also encourage foreign investment—both Liberians and foreigners worry about schools for their children.

In terms of health, Liberia badly needs a national strategy for HIV/AIDS. The prevalence rate has skyrocketed from 5.9 percent in 2003 to twelve percent today by UNDP estimates. The rate may be as high as 18 percent, the figure quoted by former Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Jacques Klein, in late January, 2006. Liberia should be added to PEPFAR and given help in preparing its application to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

Economic Revitalization: Economic revitalization involves managing the Governance and Economic Management Assistance Plan (GEMAP), reducing debt, increasing revenue generation and generating employment.

The Liberian economy has been devastated by 15 years of civil war and at least 25 years of official pillage of the national treasury. The Liberian annual budget is \$80 million. In addition to civil servants, various other government workers have not been paid in several months, including teachers, police and security guards in the Executive Mansion. A senior official in the new government told me that more than 25 percent of the Liberian Petroleum Refinery Corporation's revenues were missing. Corruption was so rampant under the NTGL that donors developed the Governance and Economic Management Assistance Plan (GEMAP) to safeguard donor assistance and improve economic governance.

After major resistance, the transitional government signed off on GEMAP in September, 2005. GEMAP aims to improve financial management and accountability, improve procurement practices, develop a process to control corruption and build Liberian capacity. A major feature is co-signing authority with external advisors for eight key finance and budget positions, and management contracts for five state-owned enterprises.

GEMAP is a start, but to really begin economic revitalization, the new team must have a multi-pronged approach. Liberia needs serious debt relief. Liberia has about \$4 billion in total debt, with IMF arrears of \$800 million. The debt-to-GDP ratio is 900 percent. A six-month staff monitoring program with the IMF to establish credibility starts in April, but assuming no hiccups, reaching the HIPC completion point will take about three years. In the meantime, Liberia must keep borrowing to repay accumulated interest, currently \$30,000 a month. The country needs debt relief, similar to the relief granted Poland and Iraq.

The new government must also increase revenue generation and create jobs. One way to boost national revenues is to increase revenue from ports and petroleum imports. To stop thefts, the government is initiating pre-shipment inspections at the point of departure. One employment strategy under consideration is the launch of a major public works program tied to road-building which is described above. Also discussed above, public-private partnerships are a useful vehicle in revenue generation and new employment programs, but it is important that all such private sector initiatives have a social investment component.

### **Assistance Priorities**

President Sirleaf's economic recovery and stabilization plan is rational, comprehensive and long-term. It can be realized with judicious and generous outside support. Below are six recommendations for US support to the new government.

1. \$200 million for development assistance to rebuild Liberia. It is obvious that Liberia teeters on the brink of reconstruction or destabilization. On the one hand, this war-ravaged post-conflict country must try to function with an \$80 million national budget, huge debt burden, unpaid civil servants, and no infrastructure. On the other hand it has new, competent leadership and a well thought-out plan for moving forward. Resources will make the difference. Liberia can absorb \$200 million in US assistance for community development, strengthening democratic institutions, economic reform, education, HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, infrastructure development, employment generation, civil service reform and agricultural revitalization. The country urgently needs the funds this year. As I understand our budgetary system, supplementals are for emergency funding and this is an emergency. FY 07 on line budgetary funding is too late for a country with an \$80 million annual budget, some of which has been stolen.
2. Increased support for GEMAP. In terms of the economy, donor support of GEMAP through continued funding of the technical assistance and external advisors will demonstrate donor commitment and confidence in the president's courageous effort to revamp the financial architecture of her country.
3. Continued support for re-establishing a national military. On the security front, we applaud US funding for training a new army and urge continued funding to complete the job.
4. Continued support for UNMIL. The US should also ensure that UNMIL is retained at its present strength and that no battalions are diverted to deal with the conflict in neighboring Cote d'Ivoire.
5. Provide debt relief. US support for debt relief, similar to our efforts in Poland and Iraq, would weigh mightily in the effort to ease the reconstruction burden.
6. Lift restrictions of the Brooke Amendment. Liberia does not have access to some possible US funding because of arrears on debt payment. The US should lift these sanctions from Liberia as soon as possible, as we have done for Pakistan and other countries with extenuating circumstances or who are strong allies in the war on terrorism. Liberia meets both criteria.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, the issues in West Africa are bigger than Liberia or any one country, but Liberia, aching for recovery, can be the vanguard. With three million people, abundant natural resources, a new president with economic expertise and political competence, Liberia can be a model of a failed state transformed into a thriving

democracy. It will take human and financial resources, but I cannot think of a better long-term investment with a guaranteed ROI (return on investment).

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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